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ABSTRACT

The issue of character education has recently received much attention at both the state and federal level. One approach that shows particular promise in instilling in children character traits known to promote success and happiness in life is that of using children's literature as a pedagogical device. This digest examines some of the pertinent issues surrounding this important method of instruction. It considers the following: which traits to teach; which literature to choose; instructional strategies to use; and opportunities beyond the classroom. It is also noted that, to be most effective, character education should extend beyond the school walls. (NKA)

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By

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication
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Character Education through Children's Literature

by Shawna Brynildssen

The issue of character education has recently received much attention at both the state and federal level. Legislators, teachers, and parents are all grappling with how best to instill in America's youth not merely information but also the character traits known to promote success and happiness in life, and which will best enable young people to maximize their use of their education and knowledge. One approach that shows particular promise is that of using children's literature as a pedagogical device.

Some educators believe that literature can be a very powerful tool. According to Weaver (1994), "Literary characters have almost the same potential for influencing the reader as the real people with whom a reader might share a reading experience" (pp. 33-34). Given this, the implications for literature's role in character education are great. This digest will examine some of the pertinent issues surrounding this important method of instruction.

Which Traits to Teach

There is some slight variation among researchers as to which specific traits constitute an ideal character education program. For example, the Character Counts! Coalition offers six "pillars" of good character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Phi Delta Kappa's 2000-2001 *Study of Core Values* listed learning, honesty, cooperation, service to others, freedom, responsibility, and civility as the core values on which most people agree. And Lickona (1991) offers a slightly more comprehensive list, which includes responsibility, respect, tolerance, prudence, self-discipline, helpfulness, compassion, cooperation, courage, honesty, fairness, and democratic values.

The answer to the question of "which traits?" may be that there *is* no universal answer. The "right" mix of qualities may vary, depending on the school and the community. According to Leming (1996), many character education advocates suggest that educators involve their local communities in identifying and defining the virtues to be woven into their educational goals. Otten (2002) agrees: "The conversation about what character qualities should be fostered in the school environment needs to be held with all stakeholders" (p. 63).

Which Literature to Use

Choosing which books to use can be an even more daunting task than choosing which traits to teach. The options are bountiful and include fiction and non-fiction, contemporary writings and classics. According to Otten (2002), it is best to expose students to a wide variety of literature. The Heartwood Institute, a provider of character education curricula and resources, recommends incorporating classics, folk literature, legends, and contemporary stories—all drawn from various cultures. This type of diversity allows students to discover similarities in values across geography, culture, and time.

Instructional Strategies

Effective character education goes well beyond simply processing and storing information. Merely having students read about exemplary characters making good choices will do little, if anything, to change either thinking or behavior. Lickona (1993) says that character education must be designed to "encompass the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of morality." That is, it must help students "*understand* the core values, *adopt* or commit to them, and then *act upon* them in their own lives" (pp. 5-6).

The first two stages of this comprehensive approach, then, are reflection and response. Educators can use a range of activities– including discussion, debate, research, role-playing, and essay writing or journal keeping to prompt and nurture students in these stages.

- *Discussion.* Leal (1999) places particular emphasis on the role of discussion, noting that, "Students' acquisition of knowledge is not limited to the personal construction of meaning, but is in fact extended, modified, and restructured as a result of the social construction of meaning" (p. 2). She cites Bleich (1978), who claimed, "It is not possible to 'have' an interpretation of a work of literature in isolation from a community."

  Leal goes on to offer a strategy for engaging students in reflection and discussion. Developed during a 1997 study of Newbery Medal recipients, her approach calls for students to individually keep running records of the character traits they find in a work of literature. (Note: the specific traits students track are pre-identified and defined by teacher and student collaboration). After reading and recording, students rank the traits they found by the number of times they appear. A small-group or whole-class discussion then follows, in which students compare their findings. In a study of middle-grade classrooms using this technique, Leal found that "...students became quite engaged not only in discussing character traits demonstrated by the book characters, but also went on to discuss these character traits in their own lives" (p. 4).

- *Debate*. According to the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs—a national resource for character education, directed by Thomas Lickona—structured classroom controversy offers a promising approach to developing moral reflection. As outlined by Johnson and Johnson (1995), this approach calls for teams of students to advocate for opposing positions on an issue, then switch sides and advocate for the positions they initially opposed. When used in conjunction with literature, this method allows students to debate the often-complex issues found in their reading: Was this character justified in doing what he or she did? Are there circumstances under which the character would have been justified in acting differently? And so forth.
- *Research*. Searching for further information—both online and in the library—can help students gain a more profound familiarity with a given character trait. They may be able to find examples of other characters exhibiting the trait in different circumstances and different ways, thereby broadening their scope of understanding. They may also be able to bring new information back to the class, thereby generating new conversational threads and bringing to light unexamined ideas.
- *Role-playing*. Students can delve more deeply into the natures and motivations of the literary characters they are studying by role-playing imaginary interactions. This method can be especially useful when examining qualities related to resolving conflict and living peaceably. "Role-playing a character's conflict and resolution can be effective 'practice' for times when students actually become involved in personal conflict" (Otten, 2002, p. 82).
- *Journal Keeping or Essay Writing*. These activities allow students to reflect on their learning and apply it to their own lives. After the class studies a character trait, as illustrated in a book or story, the students write their personal responses in their journals (or in an essay), prompted by a series of teacher-directed, open-ended questions. For example, the teacher might ask, "What do you think you would have done if you had been in that person's position?" or "Can you think of a better way he or she might have handled the situation?"

Beyond the Classroom

The third tenet of Likona's approach to character education involves helping children act on the values they have learned and adopted. This step takes students out of the classroom and into the real world—helping them practice positive character traits not only in school but in all areas of their lives. This aspect of character education demands school-wide involvement. As Lickona (1993) points out, "if schools wish to maximize their moral clout, make a lasting difference in students' character, and engage and develop all three parts of character...they need a comprehensive, holistic approach" (p. 6). He goes on to explain that such an approach "tells schools to look at themselves through a moral lens and consider how virtually everything that goes on there affects the values and character of students" (p. 6).

To be most effective, character education should extend even beyond the school walls. Students should be given the opportunity to practice their positive character traits by performing community service. This type of service learning reinforces beliefs and values and encourages moral development (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Students' families are another key factor to consider in developing a holistic approach. Otten (2002) notes that because children learn as much at home as they do at school, it is vital to involve parents in teaching character. One way to do this is through take-home sheets that explain what children are learning and offers ways for parents to reinforce the new knowledge.

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